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En Route to *the Eldorado* of Europe

Pierre Veau CSSp

ALGERIA

Migrants are persistent. They are willing to take enormous risks. Last December we took a young man from Mali to hospital because he was totally exhausted. He and three other young men had been wounded by gunshots from Moroccan soldiers as they were attempting to get over the fence into the Spanish enclave of Melilla. Only a few months previously he had been in a shipwreck near the Canary Islands. At the same time I learned

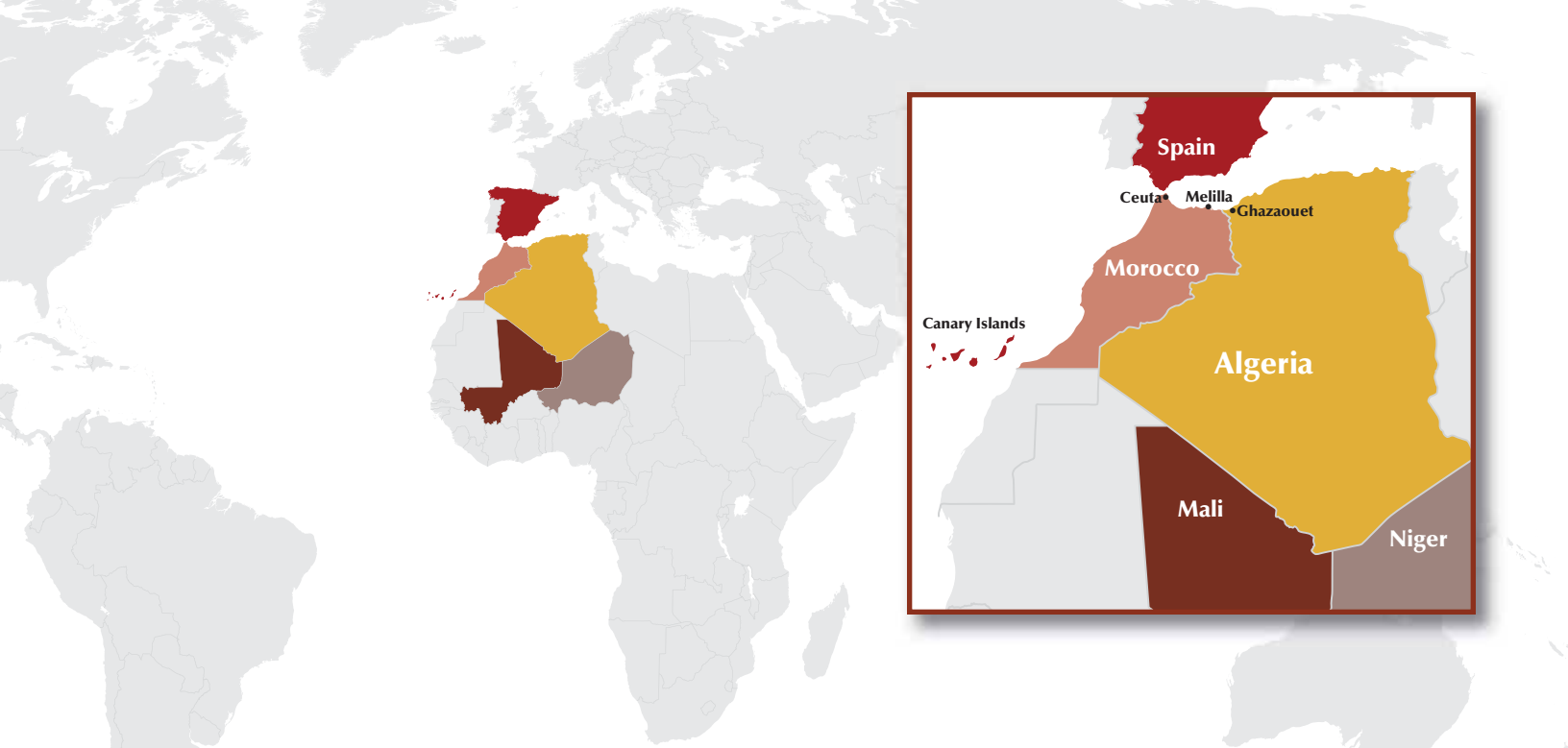
of nine young men from Ghazaouet where I live, who were found dead in the sea attempting to reach the Spanish coast.

The list could go on. Difficulties and dangers are not going to stop this movement of migrants from one continent to another in search of a better life. Neither will the threats and sophisticated policing methods put in place by western countries stop it. Even several million young Algerians share this desire to emigrate.

All eyes on Europe

I live in Ghazaouet, Algeria, a port close to the border with Morocco. Three of us Spiritans form a regional community spread out over 250 kms. In contrast to the few foreign Christians legally in the country, there are several thousand illegal immigrants, the majority of them Christians.





For them Algeria is a step on the way to Europe, the “Eldorado” so often depicted in the media. From here migrants hope to get over the six metre high fence and reach the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, or even Gibraltar. They are seeking the easiest way to get to Europe, but they have to face the variable policies and regulations in the countries they cross, as well as pressure from Europe.

Various police forces have burned down temporary shacks in their pursuit of these illegals. When they arrest them, they deport them to Morocco or to the border of Niger and Mali. So their numbers diminish for a period of time — only to rise again.

Approach with respect

We see ourselves getting involved with people in distress. We befriend them,

listening to each national, linguistic or religious group. Many come from the Sahel region, others from Mali and Senegal or, further south, from tropical and equatorial Africa. They usually speak French, English or Portuguese. They are mainly Christian with some Muslims. There are very few women among them.

A sister who speaks English well comes with me and, even though we do not wear

from European countries trying to control the situation.

We have built up good relationships with hospital staff, especially in the emergency department. When we bring in a sick migrant we always get a good reception even when they are busy. Other Algerians have organized a collection of warm clothes for them. This is remarkable because the dominant attitude toward black people is one of

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anything distinctive or initiate any talk about religion, some of the young people frequently say, “You are a sister” or “You are a priest.” They have already received some help from religious personnel along the way. We approach the immigrant communities with respect, listening to what they want to share about their personal, family and community lives.

We are foreign Christians and our presence sometimes gives rise to suspicions. The problems we meet do not come from the immigrants but from the Algerian authorities, themselves embarrassed by this situation. On the two occasions we were arrested and taken to the police station, we even received some discreet encouragement. The police are pressured by their superiors who in turn are under pressure

rejection. They are blamed for many ills — stealing, drugs, prostitution, Aids. Some of this may be true, but it is unjust to generalize and ignore the great suffering of the majority caught up in their efforts to migrate.

A shared struggle

We frequently hear people say, “We have enough problems in the west — growing instability, unemployment, insecurity, suburbs in flames ... You want us to deprive ourselves even more by helping others!”

The ultimate aim of this shared struggle is that each person and each community flourishes in their own culture with dignity and a good standard of living. We can make an important contribution by raising people’s awareness of this challenge in a world so greatly tempted by discouragement. ■

John Kilcrann

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) is right at the centre of our Spiritan mission. The new calls, challenges and possibilities that come to us draw our attention to peace building, conflict resolution, reconciliation, dialogue, lobbying and advocacy in favour of the poor and marginalized, work for liberation of the oppressed and for the integrity of creation.